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Pretoria admits troops still in Angola, won't confirm report two men killed

By Michael Sullivan
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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — South Africa admitted yesterday that it still had troops inside Angola — more than a month after a much-publicized withdrawal.

But the South African government would not confirm reports from Angola that two of its commandos had been killed and one captured in a clash with Angolan troops in the oil-rich northern province of Cabinda.

Gen. Constand Viljoen, chief of the South African military, confirmed the presence of intelligence-gathering troops in Angola in a terse statement from Pretoria, after initially denying that any men remain in the country. He stopped short, though, of admitting that it was South African soldiers Angolan troops had killed and captured.

In Washington, the State Department said yesterday it "deplores" South Africa having troops in Angola and that U.S. diplomacy toward southern African is aimed at stopping the violence and obtaining the removal of foreign troops from the region.

"It is clear the presence of South African intelligence-gathering teams inside Angola runs contrary to those goals, and the United States deplores such action," department spokesman Bernard Kalb said.

Reports from Angola said two South African commandos were killed and one was captured Wednesday near the Malongo oil complex in Cabinda province, and that short-wave radios, walkie-talkies, silencer-equipped guns and mines had been captured.

In Lisbon, Portugal, yesterday, the official Angolan news agency ANGOP quoted a Defense Ministry statement issued in the Angolan capital of Luanda, saying the "South African saboteur group" was on a mission to blow up the Malongo oil installations operated by Gulf Oil Corp., which produce about 160,000 barrels of crude daily and generate an estimated 90 percent of the Angolan government's hard currency revenues.

The offshore oil fields, located about 270 miles northwest of Luanda on the Atlantic coast, are guarded by Angolans and about 4,000 of the 30,000 Cuban troops estimated to be supporting the Marxist government of Eduardo dos Santos.

The Cabinda oil fields were hit by saboteurs last July 12 in a strike against the 25-mile-long pipeline that claimed 10 lives and spilled 42,000 barrels of crude. The South African-backed Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), fighting the government since Angola's independence from Portugal in 1975, claimed responsibility for that attack but Angola blamed Pretoria.

Gen. Viljoen, South Africa's military chief, said: "The defense force is involved in gathering information about hostile elements which threaten the safety of South West Africa and the Republic of South Africa. In this connection, the involvement of SWAPO [South West Africa Peoples' Organization], ANC [African National Congress] and even Russian surrogate forces in southern Africa are continuously studied. For this purpose, small elements of the defense force are deployed to gather this information."

Gen. Viljoen added, "At the moment, there is concern because contact with such a small element has been broken. This element was gathering information about ANC bases, SWAPO bases, as well as Cuban involvement with them in the area south and north of Luanda."

SWAPO has been waging a guerrilla war in Namibia for two decades to wrest control of the territory from South Africa. South Africa considers the ANC an illegal organization because it has refused to renounce violence as a means of bringing about change in South Africa.

On April 15, South Africa conducted a much-publicized pullout of what it said were its last troops inside Angola. The pullout came 14 months after the two countries signed a U.S.-mediated agreement and was welcomed in the United States as a boost for Washington's policy of "constructive engagement."

The withdrawal also was seen as an opening move that could help facilitate the pullout from Angola of Cuban troops helping to prop up the Luanda regime. The withdrawal of the Cubans has become a precondition in Pretoria to implementation of U.N. Resolution 435 on the independence of Namibia.

Luanda and Havana had already agreed to a partial withdrawal of the Cuban troops, but Pretoria's acknowledgment yesterday that it still had troops inside Angola may throw cold water on any good will South Africa had built up in the past month.

South African troops have been in

Angola since 1983, when a massive cross-border operation was mounted to root out SWAPO bases.

Pretoria has close links with the UNITA guerrilla movement of Jonas Savimbi, based in southeast Angola, and it might have been expected that South Africa would maintain a military presence in areas under the control of UNITA. UNITA controls at least a third of the country but has not been active in Cabinda.

UNITA's military operations up to now have focused on crippling Angola's diamond industry, which with oil are Luanda's main sources of hard currency.

During a briefing earlier this year with foreign reporters at Jamba, his headquarters in southeast Angola, Mr. Savimbi indicated UNITA soon might begin operations in Cabinda.

UNITA officers also identified a number of foreign units they said were operating with the Angolan military. It was these forces Gen. Viljoen indicated the South African troops were monitoring.

Among the foreign troops listed by UNITA as supporting Angola's army were: SWAPO, 3,000-5,000; East Germans, 2,500; Soviets, 1,500; Cubans, 40,000; Portuguese, 3,500; and ANC, 800-1,000.